

# A SMALLER ARMY?

## ADAPTING TO THE ALL-VOLUNTEER SITUATION

by

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**T**here is no greater challenge facing the US Army today than that of human resources management—the integrated, coherent handling of “people problems.” To the extent that the Army successfully responds to that challenge, it will be better able to fulfill its peacetime mission of readiness for war. To the extent that it does not, *it won't*.

This article examines three fundamental people problems:

- The adaptation of the individual soldier to the military organization (both in skills and in commitment to the organization's goals).
- The *cohesiveness* of the military organization (its ability to sustain effectiveness despite wartime stress).
- The facilitation of both of these by effective personnel management.

Before beginning discussion of these three problems, it is well to state explicitly two underlying assumptions. First, the draft is not coming back. Debate on the subject appears to be polarized between two views: “The Volunteer Force is a flop” and “Today's peacetime armed forces are the best in history.” But most informed observers agree that, desirable or not, the reinstitution of Selective Service (or even effective registration, entailing mental and physical examinations, reporting of address changes, and sanctions to enforce both) is politically infeasible in the near term. Second, the Army's budget will remain at essentially its present level, as measured in constant dollars, while costs, especially for military materiel

systems, will continue to inflate at a rate faster than the national average. Thus, even if restoration of the draft or a major increase in budget were able to solve the Army's people problems (which is itself debatable), neither is likely to occur. Some other sorts of measures will have to be taken.

### ADAPTATION OF THE SOLDIER TO THE MILITARY UNIT

There are serious differences of opinion on problems of employing today's soldier. Conventional wisdom says that today's enlistees are less able than their pre-Vietnam counterparts, while systems (not only materiel but also administrative, logistical, and command-and-control) are becoming more complex; the alleged result is that our human resources will be unable to operate and maintain our essential systems. A contrary view holds that the materiel is so “black-boxed” that soldiers' intelligence is irrelevant.

The truth lies somewhere between these extremes. There is a relationship between quantity and quality: as the number of “qualified military availables” decreases in our population (especially if unemployment decreases), the recruiting system will have to scrape deeper in the barrel to meet its goals. The statistical profile of enlisted mental categories indicates that such scraping is already occurring. But the problem may not be with *intelligence* as such. Our current testing instruments, and those we can anticipate in the future, are limited to

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measuring knowledge through the ability to read. The experience of trainers and troop commanders, however, is that today's enlistees, even those who are poor with language or functionally illiterate, have a high order of native intelligence. While some seem to lack the nimbleness of mind and hand necessary to learn quickly how to operate and maintain modern equipment, the majority are trainable if we can but take the time and effort to train them.

To meet the problem of staffing the administrative systems on which a modern army increasingly depends, however, training may not be the answer. Just as the American industrial corporation today has fewer of its people and operating costs on the assembly line and more in management, services, and overhead, the cutting edge of our military force has become smaller in proportion to overall structure. This trend has existed for 40 years. During the draft years, we came to depend on an ample supply of bright young soldiers, with willing attitudes and quickly trainable minds and hands, to man our administrative systems. The loss of the draft took away a resource which we had assumed would go on forever; now we are compensating by admitting larger numbers of women, by more efficient initial training and distribution, by "skimming off the cream" for higher echelon and high-technology uses, and by using unit officers in many of these "bright young soldier" tasks.

A maladaptive factor in our units, one which the Army has not officially recognized but which may be having the most adverse impact of all, is soldier alienation. Changes in our society, particularly loss of esteem for its institutions—the school system, the churches, the police, wholesome recreation, government—and the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate, have combined to produce widespread alienation among our nation's youth. The armed services, particularly the Army, may be getting a disproportionate share of the more alienated members of this "alienated generation." The result—if my

surmise is even partly correct—is that trainers and commanders are trying to motivate soldiers who have a reduced capacity to be motivated. To explain further: The alienated soldier is not actively hostile to the Army, or to the other institutions of our society. Rather, he is passively apathetic toward our political, social, and economic institutions, and he brings this apathy into the Army with him. During his initial training, his apathy is overcome (or submerged) in the structured, goal-oriented training process. After the soldier gets to his first unit, however, the momentum of the training process is dissipated, and he reverts to his pre-enlistment state of passive alienation.

The traditional approach to this maladapted soldier has been to counsel and coach him, to appeal to his better nature, to exercise normative leadership (as opposed to coercive leadership, which is less effective in today's Army). But normative leadership depends upon common norms shared by the leader and the led. By definition, the alienated soldier lacks the respect for our national institutions which is the basis for our military professionalism.

The high level of attrition during first enlistments is, at least in part, a manifestation of alienation. Thus directives to reduce attrition through better leadership may meet with little success. Instead, the retained but still alienated soldier's inability (which may look like unwillingness) to adapt to the military will manifest itself in other ways, such as court-martial offenses, desertion, and misconduct leading to administrative discharge. Increasing erosion of dependent medical care, soldier education, and other "promised" fringe benefits can only aggravate the situation by indicating to the soldier that the military is not really concerned for his welfare.

There are two possible approaches to correcting soldier alienation. The first is "troop education" devoted to American institutions, on the theory that ignorance is a major contributor to alienation and that knowledge will produce a sense of identification. The second approach is simply more (and more vigorous) training, on the

theory that behavior conditions attitudes and that doing things together (especially in an environment of hardship or danger) forges interpersonal and group bonds. Our past lack of success with troop education programs ought to tell us that this approach is not promising. The latter, training, we know how to do if we will but do it.

It may well be that the pendulum of alienation is swinging the other way in our national society, that is, that our institutions are rising in public regard, but the shift cannot quickly undo the damage of decades. Even if the degree of alienation among American youth is diminishing, it will be years before significant improvement is reflected in our entering enlistees. In the meantime, we must do the job through effective training.

### **COHESIVENESS OF THE MILITARY UNIT**

The subject of unit cohesiveness is fundamental for the Army. A military unit is greater than the sum of its parts—its men, equipment, supplies, administration, logistics, and command-and-control. What makes the product greater than the sum is cohesiveness, a concept like the nuclear physicist's binding energy, which is that part of the atom's mass transformed into energy during nuclear fission. There is no good synonym in our current vocabulary; neither *morale* nor *esprit* nor *unity-of-purpose* quite defines cohesiveness.

*Cohesiveness is the ability of a military unit to hold together, to sustain mission effectiveness despite combat stress.* That stress, which cannot be fully simulated in peacetime, includes enemy violence, Clausewitz' "friction of war" (the concept that the simplest tasks become difficult under fire), fear of death and wounds, personnel turbulence, uncertainty, and the often poorly perceived connections between national purpose and military action, between national resolve and soldier sacrifice.

The weakening of cohesiveness in the US Army has a number of causes. A principal one is officer turbulence. This turbulence is

partly caused by the relatively short officer career, in which even those officers who survive the "up or out" promotion system still nearly all retire from the military with 20-26 years of service, at ages between the early and late forties. In this short span, the typical officer goes through five or six grades of rank, alternates between troop and staff assignments for his professional development, and attends three or four levels of professional schooling, the effect of which being that he is physically transferred every year and a half or so. Such turbulence is aggravated, and the time between moves shortened, by time-limited overseas rotation, a policy predicated on sharing the burdens of overseas assignments equitably and preventing the creation of a "foreign legion" in the Army. Turbulence is worsened still further by the centralized and grossly inflated officer evaluation system which, in practice, encourages officers to seek a variety of jobs as evidence of generalist versatility and hence promotability.

The stability of noncommissioned officers' tours is better than that of officers' tours, but here also overseas rotation and promotion through a short career generate considerable turbulence. Reenlistment rates for middle-grade NCOs are dropping, even in the 10-15 years-of-service group, where the prospect of 20-year retirement exerts a powerful hold; if this trend continues, it will constitute not only a further source of leadership turbulence but indeed will strike at the very heart of Army professionalism. The tours of first-term soldiers are highly turbulent, not only because of overseas rotation but also because of massive attrition (35-40 percent) before the completion of their first term of enlistment and a low reenlistment rate (compared to other volunteer armies) of those who do make it through the first term.

The overall result of such turbulence is a psychological climate of transitoriness and a superficiality in interpersonal relationships among officers, noncommissioned officers, and soldiers. The situation is certainly better than it was during the Vietnam War; but in absolute terms the problem remains serious.

Finally, a major contributor to weakened

cohesiveness is a perceived lack of purpose in today's troop units. Commanders, and their officers and noncommissioned officers, complain of being besieged by a variety of inspections, VIP visits, demonstrations, and a day-to-day degradation of "available for training" troop strength through a host of individual-centered activities. These last include on-duty education, surveys and interviews, and medical and dental appointments. A sense of unit purpose is further vitiated by fatigue details and "borrowed military manpower" for support of the host installation. All of these elements detract from the ostensibly first priority of the unit, training for the potential battlefield. Even when the unit does find time and is able to bring together the bulk of its people for training, the officers and noncommissioned officers are all too often unprepared to conduct such training productively because of their time-consuming involvement in a bewildering array of administration-laden "programs." The impact upon cohesiveness is twofold: a degradation of sense of purpose because of insufficient meaningful activity, and a loss of confidence in the unit's effectiveness because of insufficient training.

There are several possible approaches to reducing turbulence and enhancing sense of unit purpose and cohesiveness. First, the Army could replace its system of individual rotation with one of unit rotation. There have been a number of experiments of this sort in the past, each of which resulted in the conclusion (well-embedded in institutional memory) that such efforts are prohibitively expensive and insufficiently workable. The first was Operation Gyroscope in the late 1950's, conducted at such a level of aggregation (division and separate regiment) that it strained the logistical system and temporarily uncovered dangerously long segments of NATO's defensive frontier. More recently, the "Brigade 75" experiment proved to be excessively disruptive to other units at the rotating battalion's home station, because the battalion had to replace some 50 percent of its people prior to movement. The

resulting turbulence essentially negated the stabilization benefits which the rotation system was supposed to enhance. From these two experiences, we can conclude that a system of unit rotation would require that the rotating organization be at a logically manageable echelon such as the battalion, that all members of combat arms battalions be deployable (denial of enlistment to such "undeployables" as persons with family or financial problems might entail a reduction in the size of the Army), and that the system be adopted Army-wide rather than experimentally.

A second approach is to extend tenure for commanders and key staff officers from the current one-and-a-half-year standard to three or four. This step has been rejected by the Army thus far (except for a marginal increase to two years for brigade and battalion commanders in Europe) on the grounds that it would detract from both career equity and preparation for mobilization through a broadened command experience base. The argument regarding career equity rests on the aforementioned concept of assignment variety as evidence of versatility and promotability, a fundamental issue in the post-Vietnam Army. At present, the idea that command experience is necessary preparation for advancement to high-level managerial responsibilities appears firmly entrenched in Army policy. The argument regarding a

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broadened command experience base, equally specious, ignores the ability of junior troop officers to learn by example.

A third approach to improving cohesiveness is enhancement of unit distinctiveness. While the recently announced ban of maroon berets for airborne troops may be a trivial matter taken alone, it is reminiscent of earlier Army debates over the Special Forces' uniqueness, special (and functional) uniform items for tankers and aviators, and distinctive headgear, scarfs, and belt buckles for various units. The fact that these manifestations of unit esprit keep cropping up in the Army is a clear indication of felt need; the fact that the Army's senior leaders keep smacking them down is also a clear indication that the leadership views these manifestations as separatist or undisciplined.

Finally, in consonance with earlier discussion of removing soldier alienation through training, more (and more vigorous) training might be the best approach to enhancing unit cohesiveness. Organization theory (coinciding, happily, with conventional wisdom) holds that shared experience is the best source of group solidarity. Particularly is this true if the group experiences shared danger or discomfort.

Unfortunately, the Army's current budget is essentially the same in constant dollars (discounting a wartime increment) as it was a decade ago. In that same period, the pay of junior soldiers has nearly doubled and the costs of major materiel items have more than doubled (also in constant dollars). The net result has been a significant reduction in unit *activities*, particularly realistic field training, which is expensive in terms of fuel and repair parts. A significant increase in training would require, in the absence of larger budgets, a reduction in the size of the Army. There is deep division of opinion as to whether the resulting increase in unit readiness would compensate for a reduction in the number of divisions, which is specifically keyed to the country's strategic commitments. I believe that it would more than compensate. Napoleon said that "God is on the side of the

big battalions"—not *more* battalions. The German victory in 1940 over the French Army, the largest army in Western Europe at the time, should remind us that numbers alone are rarely decisive.

#### **PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE MILITARY UNIT**

The Army has been gradually centralizing many of its administrative functions for the past 30 years. Some centralization has clearly been necessary, for a number of reasons: the longer range and greater destructiveness of modern weapons, the increasing danger of military actions escalating beyond political control, the growing sensitivity of the military leadership in democracies to "subjective" political overview. Some centralization, however, has occurred not through necessity but through *ability*. That is, the advent of computers, remote terminals, and microprocessors, and of more and faster communications, has enabled higher authorities to manage lower echelons in far greater detail than they were formerly able to—and perhaps in far greater detail than is necessary or desirable.

But decentralization, even if desirable, is not always easy to attain. Commanders and political authorities will not readily give up access to information on which they have come to depend. Moreover, decentralization has apparent risks. In order to decentralize, high-level leaders and managers must be willing to accept some error, abuse, and inefficiency on the part of subordinate units. Such acceptance would not constitute approval, but only a realistic appreciation of the infeasibility and undesirability of high-level control of the working level.

The real issue, however, is not one of centralizing or decentralizing. Rather, it is one of promoting the efficient (hence centralized) handling of "soldier problems" above the unit level while simultaneously decentralizing authority over people to where it belongs, to the unit.

What are the principal responsibilities of the unit commander? They are: (1) to train his soldiers, individually and collectively, for

war; (2) to discipline his men so that their obedience and behavior will be acceptable in peace and in combat; and (3) to develop his subordinate leaders, so that they can assume higher responsibilities upon promotion or in response to wartime demands.

To help the commander carry out these responsibilities, considerable tasks under any circumstances, requires aiding him in certain subsidiary roles. These are: (1) providing pay, allowances, and fringe benefits to the soldier and his dependents; (2) guiding the soldier through the procedures required to secure those benefits; (3) helping the soldier solve his personal problems and those of his dependents; and (4) restoring to useful service, or removing from the Army, those soldiers whose misbehavior or personal problems have made them ineffective. If personnel management does not facilitate the commander's performance of these subsidiary roles, he is distracted from his primary responsibilities. Further, the commander's moral authority over his subordinates in accomplishing the unit mission depends largely on his demonstrated ability to see to their personal and family needs.

Over the problem of personnel management, and over those of soldier adaptation and unit cohesiveness, hangs the issue of unionization. Soldiers identify most with their fellow squad members, less with their platoon, even less with their company, and rarely above the battalion. Centralization of administration at higher levels for the sake of efficiency must not be allowed to usurp the company commander's *authority* to take care of his soldiers while leaving on his shoulders the burdens that go with *responsibility*. Otherwise, there may be a feeling on the part of the soldier that he has no face-to-face influence with his leader over his own welfare. Since, in such a case, he would need someone to make his case with higher echelons, he might find the idea of a union attractive. In such circumstances, even NCOs and company-level officers might no longer be opposed to the idea of unions.

Command responsibility is indivisible; responsibility and authority must be similarly

indivisible. Improved personnel management must therefore *facilitate* the commander's handling of subsidiary problems, rather than pretending to take the responsibility for them off his shoulders. In thus easing his task, it will also enable him to train his subordinates and, through training, to discipline them and develop their potential. The ultimate objective of personnel management is always *training*.

## CONCLUSION

The reforms suggested in this essay might well produce a more effective military force without a draft and without an increase in budget, but that force would necessarily be significantly smaller than the 16-division, 780,000-man Army we are now trying to maintain and which is required by our current strategic commitments. Better adaptation of the soldier to military life would require fewer, more selective enlistments, longer institutional training, a more heavily staffed training base, and vastly improved training in troop units. Improved unit cohesiveness would require the allocation of significantly greater resources to unit activities, especially training. More effective personnel management would require a larger administrative infrastructure, staffed with people imbued with the mission of facilitating the unit commander's mission, principally training.

Without a draft and without an increase in budget, but with the recommended reforms, the smaller forces would be more ready to fight (and, one might argue, more ready to expand in case of mobilization) but certainly less able in purely quantitative terms to satisfy current strategic commitments. The country would have to be told that "these are the *combat-ready* forces which the given amount of dollar and manpower resources will buy." An informed public could then better determine its "guns vs. butter" priorities. In any event, before asking for additional human or money resources, we of the Army must be able to demonstrate that we have explored diligently all feasible non-resource-additive alternatives.